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# An Investigation of How Districts in One State Identify and Serve Gifted and Talented English Language Learners

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An Investigation of How Districts in One State Identify and Serve  
Gifted and Talented English Language Learners

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelors of Science in Education

by  
Caitlin Allison

May 2016  
University of Arkansas

**Abstract**

School administrators are constantly looking for ways to make learning accessible for all students, and gifted education is no different. The process of identifying a gifted student is a difficult one at best, only made more difficult with language barriers. However, inattention to gifted English Language Learners can have detrimental effects as feelings of culture shock and homesickness combine with feeling intellectually different than one's peers. This study investigates the current procedures for identifying and providing for all gifted learners to determine if eligibility and participation is dependent on linguistic ability. The study consisted of interviewing three District Coordinators of Gifted and Talented Programs and looking to current research of best practices. The goal was to understand if and how these practices can be realistically carried out in school districts. All districts are located in the same state and interviews took place in one-on-one settings within the district offices. The three districts had English Language Learner populations of 45%, 33%, and 17% respectively from which to identify students. The Gifted population made up 9.6%, 8.4%, and 7.6% of the school districts respectively. These districts are exceeding state expectations for identification of gifted students and have relatively high populations of English Language Learners from which to pull from. Each Coordinator was asked an identical set of ten questions concerning their district's methods for identifying students they believe to be gifted, their philosophy about the purpose and effects of gifted programming on a student's development, and their specific gifted units of study. This study found that in these districts, English Language Learners are on average, 58.995% less likely to be identified as gifted compared to their native English speaking peers in the same district. Contributing factors include poor use and an absence of quality non-verbal, culturally responsive identification tools. Despite these disparities, it seems that Coordinators of these districts understand the significance of gifted programming on a student's growth and therefore

have created accessible units of study that emphasize the local community, positive mentorship, and personal choice. Research shows that the best way for these districts to improve identification methods is to employ culturally responsive checklists which look for signs of giftedness in the specific, situational ways in which English Language Learners most likely demonstrate their exceptionalities. Ultimately, districts appear to recognize the importance of serving all gifted students who are eligible, but there is more research to be done in order to implement reliable, accurate methods of identification for those who cannot express themselves through English.

*Keywords:* English Language Learners, Giftedness, Renzulli, Interview

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Educators have a responsibility to their students to create an equitable experience for all students to learn the skills necessary to be successful in life. There are many components that makes a good teacher, but all good teachers are conscientious of their students' unique personalities and needs. Given that in 2012, 9.2% of public school students were learning English as a secondary language, there is a large responsibility on school leaders to recognize and meet the needs of this group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Great strides have been made in teaching English for speakers of other languages and bilingual education, but not all English Language Learners are the same. Another 7.8% of elementary aged students are identified as gifted and talented (National Association for Gifted Children, 2014). Gifted students also have specific needs in order to grow cognitively at their own rate and feel safe enough to participate as part of the larger classroom environment. Now consider the difficulties a gifted, English Language Learner might have as they attempt to navigate a typical classroom. It is then the responsibility of every educator to serve as an advocate on behalf of this minority group of gifted English Language Learners and make adjustments so that they have the same opportunities for success as any other student.

### **Definition of Terms**

To facilitate the understanding of this study, the following terms are defined:

1. Giftedness is defined by Boothe and Stanley (2004) as, "...evidence of advanced development across intellectual areas or within a specific academic or arts-related area, *or* unusual organizational power to bring about desired results" (p. 168). Another definition from the Iowa Department of Education (2008) describes gifted students as, "those identified as possessing outstanding abilities who are capable of high performance

and require appropriate instruction and educational services commensurate with their abilities and needs beyond those provided by the regular school program. Gifted and talented children include those children with demonstrated achievement or potential ability (p. 10).”

2. English Language Learners (ELL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are acronyms that “...refers to those students who are not yet proficient in English and who require instructional support in order to fully access academic content in their classes” (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008, p.2)

### **Statement of the Problem**

The cornerstone of this problem is best stated by Boothe and Stanley (2004) who explain that only 5% of English Language Learners that are eligible for gifted programming ever receive services. The process of identifying a gifted student can be a difficult one in general. It can take many years of observation in order for a teacher or counselor to recognize a gifted student. Therefore, gifted students are almost always detected by their high test scores. In fact, “...More than 90% of school districts use test scores, including IQ scores, in the decision to place students in gifted and talented programs” (Harris et al., 2007, p. 27). Almost all of these tests are administered in academic English to assess the child’s abilities and are therefore easier for a native English speaker to complete successfully. These assessments can test the child’s oral, reading and writing English language skills and often neglect the key identifiers of giftedness: Above average learning ability, Creativity, and Task commitment. The fact that IQ or Aptitude tests administered in academic English are often the sole determinant of giftedness is the direct root of the problem that hinders countless linguistically diverse students from being identified.



Even if a school district agrees to accept a non-traditional form of identification such as classroom observations, a student portfolio, or teacher/family recommendations these documents can be difficult to verify and standardize for every child so each case is unique. The process requires a lot of communication, cooperation and determination on behalf of the child's parents, teachers, administrators and the child themselves. With ELLs, it is most likely that the child and child's parents will speak one language fluently with the teachers and administrators speaking a different language, making communication extremely limited. If the parents and teachers do try to communicate with a translator, their conversation would most likely cover the bare minimum. Hence, here lies the root of another problem: identifying a child as gifted takes a lot of communication, time and energy on behalf of a team. Meanwhile, ELL families have a problem communicating and therefore the team may not take as much time to express any observations of excellence in the classroom, in the community, or at home.

### **Lasting Effects of the Problem**

These problems are so important because identifying a child who is gifted can make the difference between a successful, positive school experience and one filled with frustration and eventual negative associations with school. When left undetected and unaddressed, gifted children reported having feelings of "...frustration, low self-esteem, isolation, difference, increasing disconnection from education and learning, negative social behaviour, and unfulfilled potential" (Centre for Talented Youth, 2015). These feelings stem from the fact that they are not receiving curriculum that is appropriate for their learning type and speed combined with the fact that their peers are not intellectually stimulating. These two issues are amplified among ELLs meaning that this population is even more sensitive to those emotions. For example, not only are ELLs not recognized for their above average abilities, it is likely that they will be labeled as

special needs because of their Limited English Proficiency. In other words, even though they may have attended the most advanced schools in their home country, they are "...slated automatically for low tracks..." upon arrival in the United States (Boone & Stanley, 2004, p. 75).

Inequality among peers is another issue taken to the extreme with English Language Learners. These children have just left their home with its familiar language and culture in order to adjust to the new way of life in the United States. They experience all the feelings of homesickness, excitement, disorientation and wonder that comes from their new life. In short, they already feel culturally different from their peers when they enter this new learning environment with students that are not of the same academic ability, making it twice as hard to relate to their peers and form healthy relationships. As the Iowa Department of Education (2008) states, "For a student to move from little or no understanding of English to being fully capable of academic success is a long journey, usually taking from four to 10 years" (p. 10). Four to 10 years is an extremely long time to allow these English Language Learners to struggle with their feelings of frustration and isolation from slow rate curriculum and unbalanced peer interaction. Educators have to take action to identify and provide for these unique learners.

### **Organization of the Report**

This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter I introduces the background of the issue to provide context about the identification and curriculum for gifted English Language Learners. Chapter II dives deeper into previous research through a review of literature. Finally, Chapter III outlines the methodology and setting of this study. Chapter IV states the results from this research and Chapter V discusses the implications, limitations, and future recommendations from those results.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

While great strides have been made in providing for exceptional students in general, there is still a lot of work to do to ensure that we are conscious of student's individual needs. This chapter is an exploration of previous research that might inform best practices for today's Gifted and Talented programs.

### **Philosophy Concerning the Importance of Gifted Programming**

The most important thing to note is *why* children need the opportunity to be tested and provided for giftedness. An article from the Centre for Talented Youth (2015) defined it clearly and concisely. They highlighted four ways that gifted programming helps gifted children being that it provides an appropriate academic challenge, makes the child to feel valued by their education system, assists the child in finding a peer group, and allows the child to feel accepted as an individual.

### **Best Practices for Identification**

Now that the "why" is defined, there have been many groups that have tried determining "how" to best identify gifted English Language Learners. One can look to the comparison of popular non-verbal tests in Lohman, Korb and Lakin's (2008) article. The overall consensus was "...that none of the nonverbal tests predict achievement for ELL students very well (p. 275)." But the authors agreed that nonverbal tests "provide helpful information" and that "...other measures of ability should be used to provide additional information about a student's academic aptitude (p. 275-276)." Pierce et.al. (2006) took that advice and formed an identification procedure that was comprised of three parts: standardized test scores, a nonverbal ability test score and a checklist completed by parents or teachers. The three-step process placed 26 students

in Gifted and Talented programming that would not have been selected if the system was based on standardized test scores alone.

The most helpful piece of literature found on the subject is the manual published by the Iowa State Department of Education (2008). It is fully comprehensive of the different types of gifted children, challenges facing both the educator and the child, and finally, suggestions for how to further observe an ELL thought to be gifted. Most uniquely, it provides a list of common characteristics of gifted English Language Learners including high ability in math, code switching easily and the ability to translate and behave appropriately in both languages and cultures. This makes it easier for educators to recognize giftedness in specifically their ELL students because as the manual explains, one challenge can be the stereotyping or bias against ELL's diverse expression of giftedness.

The Iowa Department of Education (2008) also recommends looking at various sources in order to determine giftedness for this unique population. They explain it as looking at the Cognitive, Affective and Psycho-motor/Behavioral Domains. The Cognitive Domain includes English Language Proficiency tests, Home Language tests, Nonverbal tests and Portfolios. Looking at the Affective Domain also means considering the cultural group's opinions about this child. Tools for assessment include acculturation scales and Teacher/Parent/Peer/Self-Referral. The Psycho-motor/Behavioral Domains is best for catching those that are non-academically gifted, those that are artistically talented for example. Finally, this domain suggests doing something that the others had not tried but seems fairly intuitive: compare ELLs to other ELLs in order to determine if one child is moving ahead of the others.

## **Classroom Teacher's Role in Identification**

Another common method of identification is teacher referral, Ronda Uresti, an author of "Maximizing Achievement for Potentially Gifted and Talented and Regular Minority Students in a Primary Classroom" looked at the problem from an entirely new light taking teacher identification of gifted students into her own hands. She implemented the Autonomous Learning Model for all of her first graders (half of which were ELLs). Using this method, Mrs. Uresti taught independence, creativity and critical thinking skills through personalized, project based learning. Because of this exposure, her first graders were thought to be the most advanced class in the school and after she created individual student portfolios, three of them (ELLs *and* non-ELLs) were later recognized as gifted. Finally, Harris et. al. (2007) focused on the big picture and reminded educators to consider what to do with gifted ELLs after the identification process is over, suggesting culturally sensitive and creative programming.

## **Summary**

In the end, all of these pieces of literature helped put together why and how we can identify gifted English Language Learners. It is important to look to these sources to create a larger picture of the situation and determine where to go from there. In the next chapter, the report will tell the details of research that sought to further understand how districts in one state used what we know about gifted education and English Language Learners in order to best provide for all of their exceptional students.

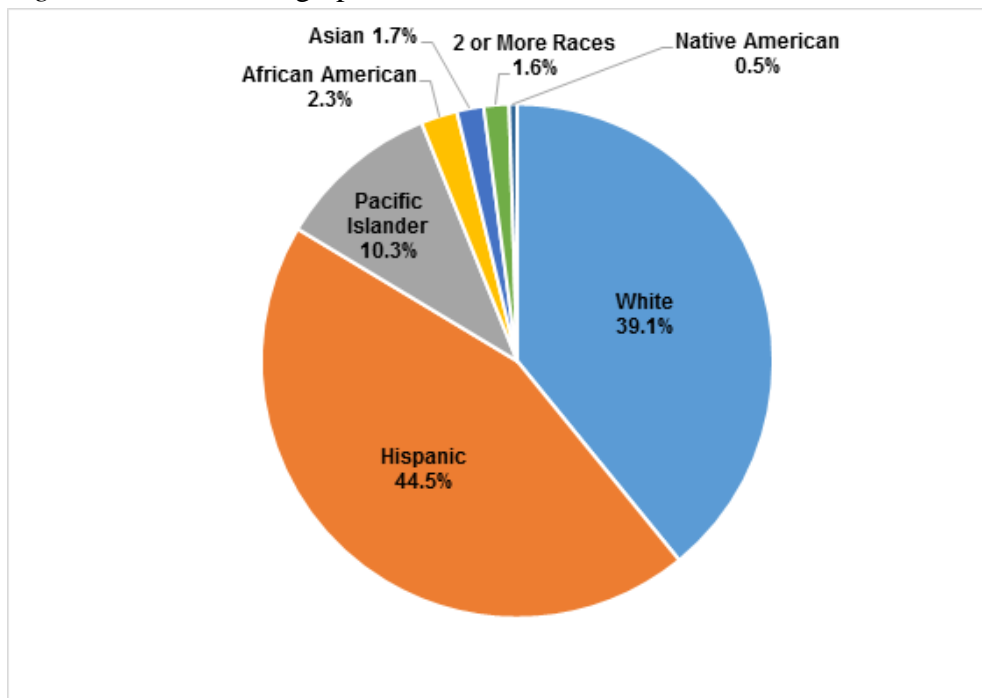
### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The study consisted of interviews with the Gifted and Talented Coordinators from each school district. These three different school districts were chosen intentionally, because they had a significant English Language Learner population pool from which to identify. All districts are located in the same geographic region of the same state and serve students age Pre K - 12th grade. The demographic information all comes from the most recent Annual State Department of Education Report Card from the 2013-2014 school year. This chapter describes each district's demographics, how data were collected, and confidentiality methods.

## Setting of School District 1 (SD1)

School District #1 consists of 28 different schools serving 20,542 students total (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014). The ethnic breakdown of the entire school district is as follows: 9,141 Hispanic, 8,032 White, 2,116 Pacific Islander, 472 African American, 349 Asian, 329 Two or More Races, and 103 American Indian (See Figure 1). Of these students, 9,244 of them are Limited English Proficient and 13,763 meet the federal guidelines for low-income. There are 1,963 students 1st - 12th identified as gifted and of those identified, 236 are ELL.

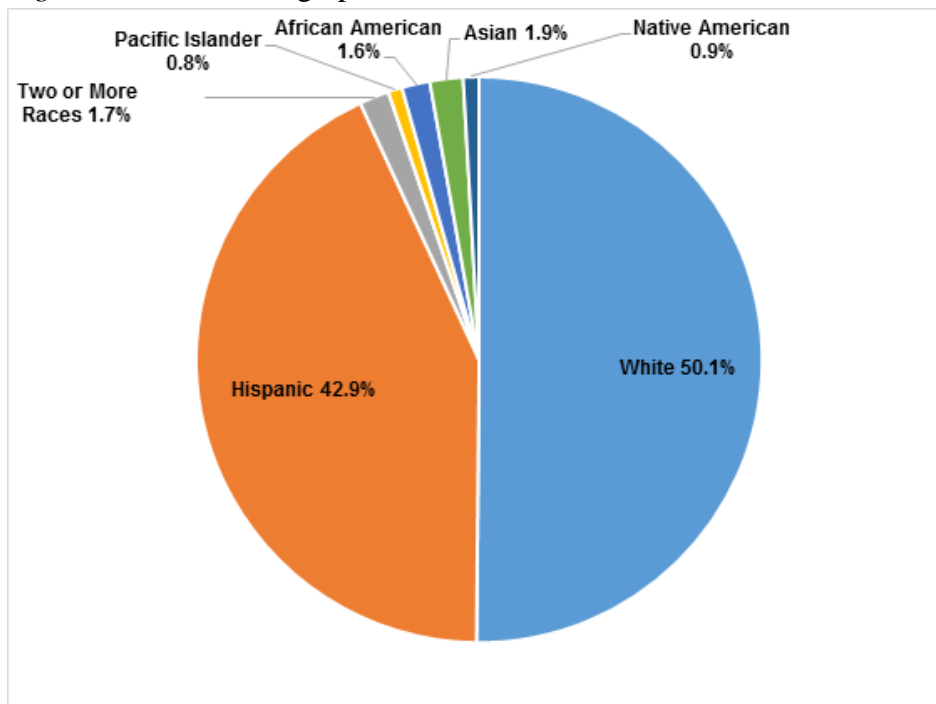
*Figure 1: Racial demographics for School District #1*



## Setting of School District 2 (SD2)

School District #2 consists of 26 different schools serving 14,757 students total (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014). The ethnic breakdown of the entire school district is as follows: 7,393 White, 6,331 Hispanic, 280 Asian, 251 Two or More Races, 236 African American, 133 Native American, and 118 Pacific Islander (See Figure 2). Of these students, 4,870 of them are Limited English Proficient and 9,002 meet the federal guidelines for low-income. There are 1,234 students 3rd - 12th identified as gifted and of those identified, 99 are ELL.

*Figure 2: Racial demographics for School District #2*

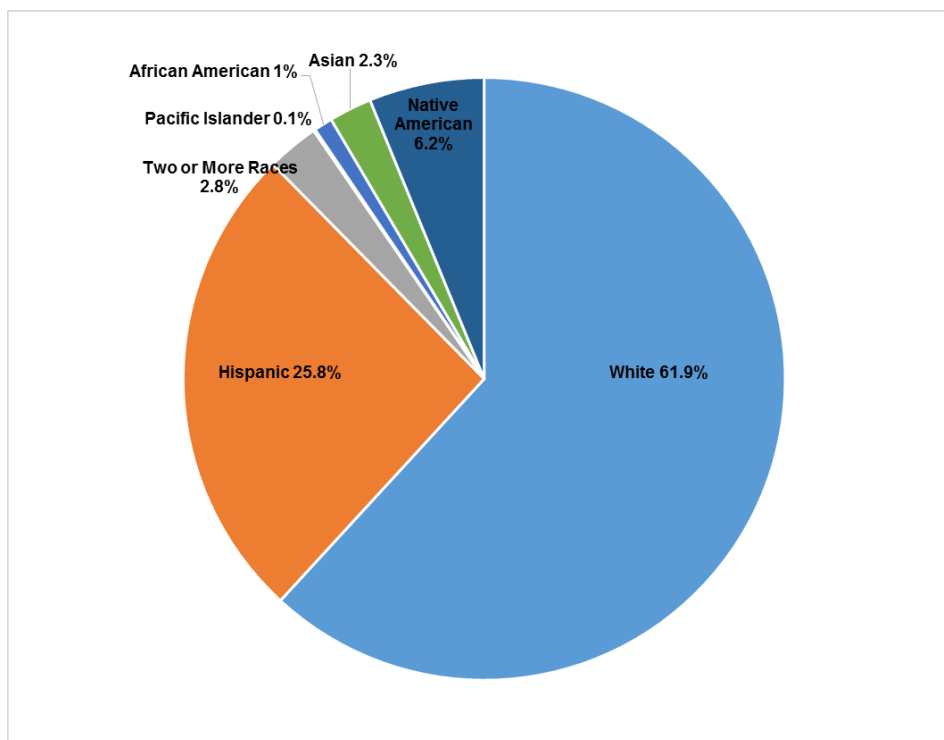




### Setting of School District 3 (SD3)

School District #3 consists of seven different schools serving 4,066 students total (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014). The ethnic breakdown of the entire school district is as follows: 2,517 White, 1,049 Hispanic, 252 Native American, 114 Two or More Races, 94 Asian, 41 African American, and 4 Pacific Islander (See Figure 1). Of these students, 691 of them are Limited English Proficient and 447 meet the federal guidelines for low-income. There are 307 students 2nd - 12th identified as gifted and of those identified, 8 are ELL.

*Figure 3: Racial demographics for School District #3*



## **Comparing Gifted students and ELL students**

The gifted population of each school district is 45%, 33%, and 17% respectively. Given that the national average of students participating in programs for English Language Learners during the 2012-2013 school year was 9.2%, these districts have exceptionally high numbers of English Language Learners from which to identify possibly gifted students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The districts also seem to be successful in general identification of gifted students, given that 9.6%, 8.4%, and 7.6% of students in these districts are identified as gifted. The state requires that districts can identify at least 5% of their students as needing gifted services in order to receive state funding for their programs. These districts are exceeding, almost doubling the number required. In a perfect system, English Language Learners should have the same chance of being identified as gifted as everyone else. The percentage of gifted students out of all students should be equal to the percentage of gifted ELLs when compared to all ELLs. When looking at the data though, there still seems to be inequalities between the rate at which native English speakers are identified and their ELL peers. For example, in School District #1, of the 9,244 students categorized as Limited English Proficient, only 236 of them are also identified as gifted. 2.553% of the English Language Learner population also receives pull-out gifted services. This is in comparison to the 1,727 students or 15.286% of the native English speaking population. Meaning that English speaking students are 4.99 times more likely to be selected for gifted services than their ELL peers.

When looking at School District #2, there are 4,870 English Language Learners with 99 of them qualifying for gifted programming. This means that 2.033% of ELLs qualify through the current identification process. However, 1,135 or 11.480% of native English speakers are eligible

for gifted services through the current identification process. An English speaker in SD2, you are 4.65 times more likely to be identified as gifted than an ELL student.

Furthermore, in School District #3, 8 of the 691 ELL students are classified as gifted, a rate of 1.158%. At the same time, 299 English speakers are identified as gifted, which is 8.859% of the whole proficient English speaking population. English speakers in this district are 6.65 times more likely to qualify for gifted services under the current screening process.

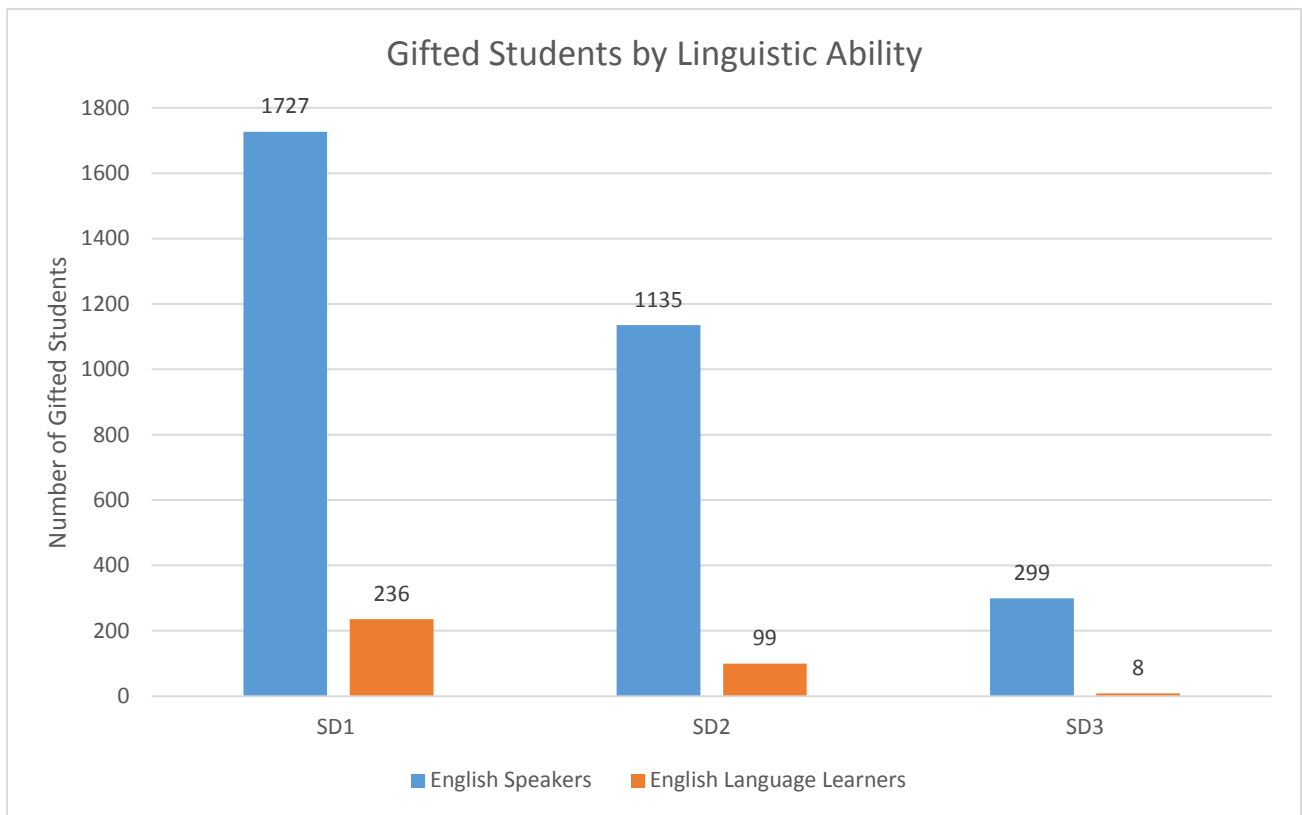


Figure 4: Types of students in gifted programming in each district

### Data Collection

Data were collected through one on one interviews with district Gifted and Talented Coordinators. Each were asked the same ten questions concerning identification, the purpose of Gifted and Talented programming in general, and their District's specific gifted programming (see Appendix A). The Coordinators were made aware of the questions through email more than

two months in advance and reminded of them at every point of communication prior to the interview. Each interviewee also received a printed copy of the questions to refer to throughout the interview process. Some Coordinators provided supplemental documents to support their answers. These interviews took place in the Coordinator's respective offices. The interviews took 33 minutes, 52 minutes, and 28 minutes for School District 1, 2, and 3 respectively. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

### **Confidentiality**

Permission to conduct these interviews was granted by the University of Arkansas' Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). Consent was also gained from each School District concerning their general willingness to participate in the study. Later, each individual participant signed an Informed Consent form that outlined the specific expectations, risks, and benefits of the study (see Appendices C). Each participant signed that they understood that "All names used in the final project will be aliases. It will not be possible to identify any one person in any one school using the information provided. Finally, the final project will only be made available to my research committee and me (the primary researcher). An executive summary will be made available to all districts that participate."

### **Summary**

In the end, a variety of districts with populations relevant to this study were chosen as a testing ground to see what are practical solutions to identifying students for giftedness, even when language is a limitation in doing so. This chapter outlined what kind of districts we are working with, the next chapter will explore how working with these districts informed best practices for identification and programming for gifted English Language Learners.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

Although each district had its own methods, since they are located in the same state which has its own guidelines for Gifted Education, there are some areas in which they overlap. For example, all mentioned that they must use two objective measures (such as a standardized test) and two subjective measures (such as a checklist or anecdotal notes) in the pursuit of identifying students (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009a). For funding purposes, they are also required to identify at least 5% of their students as requiring gifted services. Another common theme, although not a state mandate, is that all three districts followed Renzulli's theory that students display giftedness in three ways or the Renzulli Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness - Above Average Academic Ability, Creativity, and Task Commitment (Renzulli, 2005). In terms of actual programming, all districts returned to the state mandated Process Standards in order to create their curriculum. These standards include benchmarks for creative and critical thinking, independent and group investigation, as well as personal affective growth (Arkansas Department of Education, Core Process Goals for Gifted and Talented Seminars, 2009b). This chapter is dedicated to interview responses concerning how these districts identify students, what they believe the purpose of programming is, and their actual Gifted and Talented programming.

### **Case Study 1**

It is important to note that School District #1 won Most Outstanding Gifted Education program at the Arkansas for Gifted and Talented Education conference recently (Bernet, 2016). The Coordinator attributes this success to "pro-gifted Superintendent" that assists in building an environment where students' needs are put first and administrators strive for constant growth in

the quality of resources that they provide for their students (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016).

**Identification.** Decisions about gifted students in School District #1 are made by a committee of five: a GT Licensed Teacher, the Principal, the Assistant Principal, a School Counselor, and the GT District Coordinator. This group looks at the results of 11 different objective and subjective testing measures. These measures are as follows: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests (now replaced by Measures of Academic Progress -MAP tests), Screening Assessment for Gifted Elementary and Middle School Students (SAGES) tests, Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test, Williams & Torrance Creativity tests, Classroom Grades, Parent Recommendations, Teacher Recommendations, Cultural Checklists, ESL Level, and Anecdotal Notes. Each of these measures is weighted equally so that students are not at a disadvantage if traditional testing or classroom grades do not reflect the student's true ability. Every student experiences weekly whole class enrichment in Kindergarten and 1st grade. A student can then be nominated for screening and pull-out services beginning in 2nd grade. The Coordinator shared, "In order to be nominated for gifted, that nomination can come from either a K-1 enrichment referral, the classroom teacher, the parent, the student himself or herself, or a peer can nominate or a community business patron can nominate." All forms or nomination conferences are translated or have a translator present. For those that do not quite make the cut, the Coordinator describes a fail-safe called the "Revolving Door" where, "...they can still revolve in for an area of interest, or a propensity in drama and just do Shakespeare Festival with us, or come in for nine weeks for a particular unit of study" (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). Another interesting aspect of their identification process is the consideration of ESL Level and Cultural Checklists. For example, a classroom

teacher that knows to look for above average ability or task commitment amongst their students might associate those traits with a competitive nature or a confident demeanor. The research based “Identification of Hispanics, American Indian, and Alaska Native Students” checklist states that gifted students of culturally diverse backgrounds are less likely to be competitive, ask questions, or make eye contact. It re-directs the classroom teacher to be aware of true indicators of gifted potential, such as taking risks in trying to communicate, a curiosity of American culture, and social maturity.

**Philosophy of Giftedness.** School District 1 acknowledged that gifted students had both cognitive and social/emotional needs to be met. When speaking about cognitive needs, the Coordinator clarified, “We sometimes think that gifted kids are good at all things, and they have to be perfect, but they're really not. They tend to be interested in a certain area...” (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). They say that now it is the district's responsibility to foster critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and collaborative team participation skills. Collaboration is actually the area that most students need help with, given that some gifted students rather work in isolation. This is also a social skill that has to be learned. SD1’s gifted facilitators take that responsibility very seriously. When asked by their Coordinator “What do you teach?” Many content area specialists, “....said I teach compassion, I teach collaboration. They realize in the world of gifted with students, those social and emotional needs are so critically important, because they [the students] don't always fit in” (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). The Coordinator says that not only do students not feel like they fit in, they often want to be invisible and may act out when they do not know how to communicate their feelings. At this point the Coordinator says the best thing a teacher can do is be an advocate.

Also that, “We as teachers need to make sure we bond with our students, make sure that we know our students” (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016).

**Programming.** Again referring to the work of Renzulli, SD1 believes in the implementation of Type III enrichment when working with their gifted students. Type III enrichment is the investigation of real world problems individually or in small groups and using their individual skills to create real world solutions (2014). For this reason, there is no one, fixed curriculum occurring in every school at the same time. Students have choice at every stage to decide what content, process, and product they choose in order to display their ability. The Coordinator spoke of individual projects like one third grader’s YouTube© video on Optical Illusions or another student’s tri-fold brochure on the Beaver Lake watershed (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). All students are allowed to follow their own interests to create something they feel proud of. While some work individually, the biggest impact is made when students work together. One middle school took their creative problem solving skills to provide over 5,000 meals for a local charity when they sold colorful clay bowls and other products they had created (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). This project taught students economic content while simultaneously causing students to consider how they might use their special skills to improve their community further. Elementary students had the same experience when learning about science content by planting trees and flowers that would improve their school. Despite students sharing their experiences and interests to help with these projects in a natural way, the Coordinator admits that there is some work to do to make sure that the program is truly accessible for all students by saying, “I think that is being addressed. I think it's important to continue to address it. I think we're not ever quite there. I think if any district in [the area] would speak to this, they would say what I'm saying. That's every year on the program



approval report, for recommendations that we make, or goals, for the last five years, I've said it's working with our ELL population (Personal Communication, February 26, 2016). The Coordinator emphasizes a close working environment with the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department in her district in order to share what they know and work toward a more equitable experience for all.

## **Case Study 2**

From the interview with School District #2, three things are clear: there are a wide variety of identification strategies in place, the purpose of the program is intentional with high expectations for all learners, and the curriculum, while structured, is flexible.

**Identification.** All students are screened for giftedness in the spring of 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade, with pull-out enrichment beginning in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade. From there, students may be referred by Teachers, Parents, Peers, and even self-nominated at any time during the school year to enter the screening process. Screening can happen after every two years and involves the gathering and analysis of subjective and objective measures and takes up to six weeks maximum (Personal Communication, February 24, 2016). Objective Measures offered at SD2 are the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test, and the Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test. It is interesting to note, when looking at the scores from the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, the student's score is not always as important as their RIT gain. Both the MAP scores, and overall Math and Reading Growth are kept on file. Some subjective measures mentioned were behavioral checklists from K-2 whole class enrichment with a GT Facilitator, the Slocumb-Payne Teacher Perception Inventory, the HOPE Teacher Rating Scale, Parent referral checklists, the Gifted Rating Scale completed by teachers or parents, as well as a Characteristics of Gifted Hispanic Students

checklist. All students are screened with the same instruments. Even the Naglieri, a non-verbal testing method, is issued to all students. SD2 mentions that they have actually inadvertently identified many low socioeconomic students with low verbal skills by using this method. However, the Characteristics of Gifted Hispanic Students is a fail-safe put into place in order to catch ELL students that may display uncommon gifted characteristics in situationally specific ways. For example, it asks if the student “Practices English skills by themselves” or “Is curious about American culture.” While by law, SD2 is only required to identify using two subjective measures and two objective measures, this district provides many opportunities for students to show what they know in those three categories.

**Philosophy of Giftedness.** SD2 also has high expectations for their highest performing students. They explain, “We believe that every child, no matter where they need to be, needs to grow a full year” (Personal Communication, February 24, 2016). Meaning that even if a third grade student is testing at a fifth grade level at the beginning of third grade, they are expected to test at a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level by the end of third grade. SD2 clarifies that they know that gifted students have needs and areas of weakness to build up. They understand the role of Gifted and Talented programming in the holistic growth of the student mentioning, “For example, if informational text is what they needed, and we needed to be better at making inferences through that informational text, then we work together as a GT team to find different learning experiences that can help our kids get further down the road, but it would be something that would be a topic on structures, connecting to our [5<sup>th</sup> grade] GT curriculum (Personal Communication, February 24, 2016).”

**Programming.** Finally, it is necessary that programming is accessible for all learners to participate fully. SD2 clarifies that there is a lot of choice in how a student plans to show their

knowledge in a GT environment. For example, "...we also allow students, each year, and it's part of our mandate in [SD2] that our students do a research project. We help encourage them to pick a topic of high interest, and in many cases, it's something that's culturally connected in terms of that (Personal Communication, February 24, 2016)." SD2 also explains that while each unit has a theme (3rd grade covers Community Development and Understanding while 5th grade covers Structures) there is choice in the process and product that the students use to grasp the content. The creation of this authentic learning environment does not occur by accident. SD2 details how students choose what they would like to work on. They are taught to plan and create a vision, then request any materials necessary. SD2 points out that, "...we make sure that our budget is built so that we could buy the Plaster of Paris, if that's what the child needs or wants. We buy the Styrofoam, because it's what they're going to build. We buy the paint. We buy it all, but we teach the students how to make their orders (Personal Communication, February 24, 2016)." In this way, all students are actually able to participate. Not held back by language proficiency, access to materials or even time. SD2 explains that students can work on their projects outside of GT enrichment time, but that parent involvement is not a requirement to a successful experience in the program. They clarify, "Just because a child is an English Language Learner, and their home language is Spanish because the parents haven't shifted to English yet, or just because there's a poverty piece, doesn't mean the parents don't still want to be involved (Parental Communication, February 24, 2016)." In this way, for SD2, students are encouraged to practice the skills of gifted learners and just think critically and creatively, regardless of the language that they speak.

### **Case Study 3**

School district #3 may not have the percentage of English Language Learners that the other districts have, but it does have a rather large population for such a small, somewhat rural

community. Another unique aspect to note about SD3 is that some of their ELLs come from migrant families. The coordinator explains, “Our numbers will look more like our school demographics at one point during the school year, then at another point they could be very different because we’ve lost students (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016).” While the Coordinator states that the number of migrant families is less than 10%, it can much more difficult to take a student through the full identification process if they might not be in the district long enough to complete screening.

**Identification.** Looking for the same Renzulli Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness criteria, SD3 distributes the Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Test, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Tests, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT), as well as subjective testing such as checklists from whole class gifted enrichment and parent checklists. All students are not screened, rather they can be referred by a gifted facilitator, a classroom teacher, or their parent. The only way that a student would take the Naglieri or Torrance, for example, is if they were referred by someone for screening. All other standardized testing that a student would take as a part of normal screening would be administered in standard academic English, although the Coordinator does mention that the Naglieri is of course, non-verbal and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking is “...read to the students and if they don't have, if they're not English speaking, we allow an interpreter to come in and interpret that for them so that, on that section, so that they know the directions (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016).” Before screening, Gifted Facilitators are in the classroom weekly during Kindergarten and 1st grade and take notes using a subjective checklist based on the Kingore Observation Inventory that looks for advanced language, seeing other’s perspective, and self-motivation or perseverance. After two years of enrichment and testing, most students are

identified at the end of 1st grade with pullout enrichment beginning in 2nd grade. The Coordinator also told me about a very unique service that facilitators provide for students after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade:

That for whatever reason they didn't place, or we may have ESL students or we may have low-SES students that just haven't had the exposure that some other students have had. We're able to pull those into an enrichment class that is taught by our GT teachers. At that time while they're teaching the students a lot of these skills and exposing them to a lot of higher order thinking skills, different ways to express yourself creatively. They're able to gather additional evidence. They're able to start collecting documentation and evidence that we could use later on in testing. (Personal Communication, February 25, 2015)

This means that students that are displaying giftedness in ways that are hard to detect or test for still receive the programming that they deserve and the time that they need to show their skills. This fail safe is very helpful to those students that may not have been immediately recommended. The Coordinator explains that these methods when used collectively, "...better identify students than if we used only one source." Saying later, "Is it a perfect method? Probably not. It's hard to know every single culture. To know what kids come from, their backgrounds. There are a lot of things that come into play but I feel like it's the best process we have at this time (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016)."

**Philosophy of Giftedness.** The Coordinator at School District #3 emphasized their strong commitment and attention to Response to Intervention (RTI). They acknowledged that the practice is often thought of as a process for struggling learners, but that it is just as applicable for advanced learners asking, "What are you going to do if they already have mastered the material

in your classroom? How are you going to engage them, enrich them, and move them so that they aren't left stagnant in a classroom? (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016). So it is clear that they understand that something must be done for these learners. At SD3 they believe the purpose of gifted programming is to promote higher order thinking skills, researching skills, and self-discipline. Their goal is to create structured environments where students can gain experience using their talents to solve problems and find answers. They too follow the State mandated Process Standards, but they often see that students grow the most in the areas that they already showed strength. For example, if a student is extraordinarily creative, in SD3's program, they usually grow creatively, but not necessarily in Ability or Motivation. The coordinator explains, "We try to allow them to grow where their strengths are, where their passions are, rather than forcing them to be well-rounded per se (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016). They do not seem to find a need for supporting social and emotional development either. At least not during the elementary years, "...at the middle school is where we typically see social and emotional issues pop up with our identified gifted students" (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016). Although social and emotional issues are not outright addressed in the Elementary programming, it is important to note that seventh and eighth graders, "....report back to us in our evaluations, is that it is a place that they can go and they can be themselves" (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016).

**Programming.** School District #3 really offers a lot of interesting projects for students to explore. Students in K-2nd grade create a newscast covering what life would be like without honeybees. Later, 3rd-5th graders create a full video biography about someone they admire. Specifically, SD3 allows 2nd grade students to take part in experiential learning about Body Systems and practice the skills of focusing their efforts, working in a group, meeting deadlines,

and critiquing themselves and others. Students were required to pick a body system, research and present a Prezi presentation along with relevant music and a 3-D model of their system of the body. After individual researching, they were invited to collaborate with the high school medical professions department to assist through research and share their own knowledge. Later, dentists, doctors and EMT's all came to share their expertise on bodily systems. Here, the coordinator took time to point out how important it is to be, "...very cognizant of the fact that we have ESL students, so we...some of our Hispanic medical professions people come in so that students get to see there are people like me, that look like me, in these professions. Students are learning not only about the body systems, but about what kinds of jobs you can have" (Personal Communication, February 25, 2016). This is definitely a great way to show students that they should pursue their dreams and interests regardless of any perceived barriers.

### **Comparison of School Districts**

Each school district seemed to have found efficient methods to accurately and fairly identify all students. School District #1 is using outstanding identification processes, including the use of cultural checklists and the "Revolving Door" policy. SD2 uses checklists and SD3 utilizes the revolving door as well, but SD1 practices both methods. Figures 4 and 5 tell all of the methods that these three school districts used. The cultural checklists allow teachers to be aware of the specific characteristics that are common amongst these learners. The revolving door also allows SD1 to be attentive to students that they can't quite fully recognize as gifted, so that these students experience similar cognitive and emotional support that they might need. School District #2 was the district to verbalize the high expectations they have for students in a very specific way. This Coordinator wants each child to grow a full year, every year of their education. These are ambitious goals for students that are commonly working a year ahead of

their peers already. SD2 still establishes that goal and works every day through gifted enrichment programs to help students make that growth a reality.

Finally, SD3 recognizes the need for incorporating the community in programming so that each child feels as though they have something to bring to the lesson and that it relates to their experience. SD1 also does this through community service learning projects. School District 3 is careful to show students of international descent that their skills do matter and that they have the ability to use their skills in extraordinary ways. By having students collaborate with high school students and professionals of their same ethnic background, gifted students feel a sense of belonging and it empowers them to continue to work hard in order to hone their natural abilities. While SD2 does provide an extraordinary amount of resources for students to study what they'd like, in the end SD3 supports ELLs by providing them with positive role models that share their experience.

*Figure 5: Objective testing measures used by Districts for identification*

	Naglieri Non- Verbal Ability Test	Otis- Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT)	Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)	Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Test	Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking	Screening Assessment for Gifted and Middle School Students (SAGES)	Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test
SD1	✓			✓	✓	✓	
SD2	✓		✓	✓			✓
SD3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		



*Figure 6: Subjective testing measures used by Districts for identification*

	Parent Referral	GT Teacher Referral	Cultural Checklist	ESL/ Bilingual Consideration	Slocumb-Payne Teacher Perception Inventory	HOPE Teacher Rating Scale
SD1	✓	✓	✓	✓		
SD2	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
SD3	✓	✓				

## Summary

This chapter detailed how Gifted and Talented Coordinators in one state decide what methods are most efficient in recognizing and providing for all gifted students. By sitting down with Coordinators who are cognizant of the issue and have been implementing solutions, one can see how effective identification processes and accessible programming can really make a difference in the lives of some of these special students and begin to look to other sources to see how we can improve. The next chapter discusses the study as a whole, the results, and the implications for the future.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The goal of this study was to understand how districts in one state identify and serve all of their students. Ultimately, the chances that an ELL has of being identified in these districts is still low and districts must look for alternative methods until the gifted and talented program is equitable and open to all.

We find in this study that every district uses a different system with varying levels of success. For example, each district uses different identification processes. Pierce et. al. recommended that districts use a three step process that involves a standardized test score, a nonverbal ability test score, and a checklist to be completed by parent or teacher. Each district currently follows these best practices by using a variety of standardized tests, the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability test, and a Parent checklist. Overall, each used the most reliable methods available to them. Unfortunately, there are not many reliable research based methods specifically for identifying English Language Learners as gifted. Creation of such rating tools and training sessions about correct use would increase the number of identified ELLs greatly.

Secondly, each program had different units of study. They each followed best practices for providing choice in project based learning, but it is concerning that research can be a requirement for students to participate fully in this type of learning. While SD1 seems to consider students specific skills in their service learning projects, so that students might participate by observing the garden or creating a marketing plan for their bowls, it seems as though other districts might want to consider programs that their students can be useful to the group, without relying on their literacy skill. Again, there is less of a focus on the creation of such material, so school leaders must be cognizant of all learners as they plan units of study so that all students feel welcome to participate.

## Conclusions

In terms of identification, all school districts see the logic behind using multiple identification measures. In order to be more successful in identification, they might look to the Iowa Department of Education that mentions comparing ELLs to other ELLs using a scale of some sort to determine if one learns more intuitively. This has shown to be successful with research based Cultural Checklists used by SD1 and SD2, that looks at ELL specific behavior such as “practicing English skills by themselves” or “is able to use English in a creative way; for example, can make puns, poems, jokes, or original stories in English” (Personal Communications, February 24 & 26, 2016). By using ELL specific rating scales and checklists, a teacher is better able to notice behaviors that would otherwise seem unimportant. School Districts might even consider using the research from Uresti, Goertz, and Bernal (2002) that recommends teachers utilize project based learning with all students. It is much easier to rate ability when students have choice in showing what they’ve learned instead of utilizing a cookie cutter, standardized project for all. Realistically, not every classroom teacher will want or be able to participate in such a style of classroom learning. The Revolving Door policies at SD1 and SD3 are the perfect compromise. They allow gifted facilitators to invite students to participate in some projects so that they might be observed more closely. This type of programming can help every student to feel supported like the Centre for Talented Youth (2015) recommends. Programming gives students an appropriate peer group to bond with and feel accepted as an individual, while being challenged appropriately and feeling valued by their education system. Quality programming fosters acceptance and a positive view of school. Each district is working very hard to create an environment like this for every one of their gifted learners. By creating

projects that all can participate fully, students learn to collaborate and to practice their skills at an appropriate level.

### **Limitations**

This study consisted of an interview with three coordinators of gifted and talented programming. This was a logical choice since these coordinators had all been in their position for 20+ years serving school districts with high populations of ESL students. They are constantly considering this issue in the pursuit of improving their programs. However, the study might have discovered different perspectives if interviews included English for Speakers of Other Languages Coordinators, classroom teachers, parents of gifted ELL students, even the students themselves. In addition, the interview style might have missed key data that would have been discovered from an anonymous survey, longitudinal study, or experimental research. Especially when considering the alternative anonymous survey, it is important to note that these were oral interviews in person with a known source. There are socially acceptable ways to speak about minority groups, such as gifted students or English Language Learners. No one would ever verbally state that they do not care about these groups, even though inclusion truly may not be a number one priority to them for several reasons. Anonymous surveys, perhaps of parents, might have uncovered a different perspective. In the end, we have to trust that these Coordinators absolutely have every student's best interest at heart and tell the true beliefs of their program.

### **Recommendations**

Ultimately, there are very few resources for the reliable identification and programming for gifted English Language Learners, yet every district seems to be relatively strong in some areas. Therefore, districts like these, that have high populations of ELLs, should absolutely collaborate as much as possible in order to implement the most reliable methods. SD1 and SD3

could share their success with the Revolving Door method with SD2. Collaboration would also help SD3, a smaller district find those Cultural Checklists and encourage them to focus more on the emotional support of their elementary aged students. This research shows us that students need to feel a sense of belonging, both as a possible immigrant to this country and as a gifted student, yet SD3 does not prioritize this until the middle and high school years. SD1 and SD2 might be able to share some programming that assists in creating a welcoming environment for all learners. In the end though, school districts can only share what is available. As of right now, there are not many reliable methods of identification or high levels of differentiation within gifted education. In the future, new strategies must be created and teachers must be trained effectively so that the number of ELLs that are identified for gifted services can continue to rise. Future researchers might choose to create or test these methods using methods that this study excluded. For example, researchers should look to other perspectives, such as ELL Coordinators, classroom teachers, parents, students, and community partners to create a larger picture of the situation. This research could encourage further research into provisions for gifted ELLs through a survey or longitudinal study of certain gifted English Language Learners. There should be more experimental research in order to solidify reliable methods of identification specific to linguistically diverse learners so that districts such as the ones in this study, can continue to create an equitable experience for all of their gifted students.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions:**

- 1) What is the identification process for gifted students? Does this process differ in any way for English Language Learners?
- 2) What indicators are you looking for? Is there a specific assessment tool that you use? Do you feel that this method most accurately identifies all indicators equally across a diverse range of gifted learners?
- 3) Are some indicators easier to observe than others? If so, how do you accommodate for learners that are gifted in one, difficult to observe way?
- 4) Do all English Language Learners display giftedness in a similar way? What indicators are most commonly observed?
- 5) How often are students tested for giftedness? What fail-safes are in place to identify all students who may still be eligible?
- 6) What percentage of the students in your gifted and talented programming is a non-native English speaker?
- 7) How does gifted programming assist with cognitive development? What skills or knowledge do you try to build? In what ways do students usually experience growth?
- 8) How do you support student's social and emotional development? Are there any social or emotional differences present among gifted students?
- 9) What is a sample gifted lesson or unit? Do you feel that this gifted programming is culturally responsive?
- 10) In what ways do you think programming is differentiated for a range of different linguistic, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds? In what ways could your gifted programming improve to better accommodate for differing interests and abilities?

## Appendix B



UNIVERSITY OF  
ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

January 29, 2016

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Caitlin Allison  
Marcia Imbeau

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 15-12-441

Protocol Title: *An Investigation of How Districts in One State Identify and Serve Gifted and Talented English Language Learners*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 01/27/2016 Expiration Date: 01/26/2017

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 3 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior* to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).



## Appendix C

### INFORMED CONSENT

*Title:* An Investigation of How Districts in One State Identify and Serve Gifted and Talented English Language Learners

*Researcher:*

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*Administrator:*

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IRB/RSC Coordinator  
Research Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
109 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
(479) 575-2208

[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

*Description:* The purpose of this honors thesis research is to better understand how school districts with high English Language Learner populations adequately identify and provide services to all students. You are being asked to participate in an in-person, oral interview that will take up to an hour and a half. Approximately ten questions that you have received in advance will be asked during this interview. The questions concern identification processes as well as programming made available for Gifted and Talented English Language Learners in your school district. By signing below, you consent to participate in the interview and have your answers recorded and transcribed. The recordings will contain identifying information, but will only be used by the researcher, Caitlin Allison, and will be deleted upon completion of research. Any transcriptions will not contain any identifying information and can be made available to the research committee as well as research participants upon request.

*Risks and Benefits:* There are no risks associated with participating in this research. Potential benefits include an increased awareness of the importance of identifying giftedness in English Language Learners in the future and better understanding of the challenges and strategies for non-language based interventions.

*Voluntary Participation:* Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary.

*Confidentiality:* All names used in the final project will be aliases. It will not be possible to identify any one person in any one school using the information provided. Finally, the final project will only be made available to my research committee and me (the primary researcher). An executive summary will be made available to all districts that participate.

*Right to Withdraw:* If you decide to participate in this program, but at any time and for any reason change your mind, you may withdraw your consent. There would be no negative consequences for this decision.

*Informed Consent:* I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the description of this study.

(Please print name)

I understand the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, the potential risks and benefits, how confidentiality will be established and maintained, and the option to withdraw.

My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participation in experimental study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRINTED NAME OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

IRB #15-12-441  
Approved: 01/27/2016  
Expires: 01/26/2017